

The Paradoxes of History in Crew and Woolman's *Tagged* and Crew and Tan's *Memorial*

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The Australian writer Gary Crew established his reputation as an award-winning novelist for young adults before turning with equal success to the writing of picture storybooks. *Memorial* is his 1999 collaborative picture storybook with the artist Shaun Tan. His sole graphic novel to date, in collaboration with Steven Woolman, is the 1997 *Tagged*. Both Woolman and Tan have collaborated with Crew on other picture storybooks which have won national awards for excellence. Collaborations between Crew and his illustrators have habitually been close and constructive (Anstey and Bull 2000: 155; Bell 1995: 12; Zahnleiter 1991: 18) so that it is impossible simply to assign the verbal text to Crew and the visual text to Tan or Woolman. In comparing the two books, I treat each as an integrated collaborative work.

Memorial and *Tagged* both deal with problems concerning ways of remembering war. In *Memorial*, a commemorative tree is cut down and a commemorative statue remains tilted. The transmission of individual soldiers' memories is represented as being vulnerable to age and self-censorship. In *Tagged*, a war veteran's life is made up of occasional compulsive retellings of the events that caused his war trauma, while he waits in vain for his dead soldier friend to rejoin him. Both books are concerned not only with the persistence of memories but also with characters' determination to put things right: the cutting down of the memorial tree or having left a friend in trouble. The publication of these two books in close succession, with Crew as collaborative author for both, and their common themes of memory and war, affords an unusual opportunity to explore differences in the representation of these themes in the picture storybook and graphic novel genres.

Tellings of war

In *Tagged*, the boy Jimmy is inspired by war comics to daydream that he is a fearless World War II fighter pilot in a lone Spitfire; but the real-life Jimmy is scared as he reluctantly pursues his dog into a derelict brickworks. At the centre of the brickworks' industrial labyrinth he finds a Vietnam War veteran who is obsessed with the guilt and pain of witnessing his friend's death at the moment when both soldiers were being lifted by a helicopter to safety. The veteran has in his possession his friend's identity tags (one of the references

to this book's title, *Tagged*) and is convinced that some day he will be able to give them back. In *Memorial* an unnamed boy listens in turn to his great-grandfather, grandfather and father telling him of the memories they associate with a tree that was planted to commemorate the ending of World War I. The boy also hears, directly or indirectly, some of the memories that these men's wives associate with the tree. Each of the men in this book has served in war, from the First World War to Vietnam, and their responses to their memories range from tears to self-censorship. By the end of the book, the big commemorative tree is cut down because its roots have been undermining the nearby memorial statue, because its leaves litter the bitumen and because it is thought to contribute to traffic risk.

Neither book offers complete reassurance to the reader. In *Memorial*, the oldest war veteran loses his train of thought as he reminisces, and his age raises the question of how long he will stay alive to pass on his memories. The boy's father altogether refuses to pass on his memories of Vietnam to his son. The transmission of memories through generations is thus highly questionable. Still more inadequate as preservers of memories are the commemorative tree and statue. By the end of the book the tree is dead and the statue lists sideways; it is also in danger at the hands of the town council as a risk to public safety. The tree, a memorial intended to stand as a reminder for generations to come, has been destroyed within a single lifetime. The death of the tree raises questions about both the value of honouring the past and the ecological value given to a tree and its population of birds, insects and animals, as weighed against the collective social values of a town's cleanliness and traffic safety. *Memorial* thus raises a variety of questions around its central issue of how, if at all, war should be remembered.

So, too, does *Tagged*. Here the Vietnam veteran speaks of the war at greater length and in more vivid detail than any of the war veterans in *Memorial*. Unlike their reminiscences, socially sanctioned by state ceremony and sanctioned in the family by the women's contributions to conversation and the child's rapt attention, the behaviour of *Tagged's* veteran is stigmatized as deviant, as the outcome of an unhealed war trauma. This man's wife and children have left him, and people began to label ('tag') him as crazy. These behaviours can be read as a collective attempt to silence the transmission of his memories. Similarly, the current collective wisdom of the town council in *Memorial* decrees the death of the tree that a previous town council had planted as a reminder for future generations. The great-grandfather repeats the phrase he used for slaughter at Ypres, 'cut to pieces', to refer to the impossibility of winning against the council. This repetition works both ways, to infuse the current council's decision with the taint of mass slaughter at war and to infuse the opposite side at Ypres with the unswayable determination to kill and the disrespect for other values that the

council exemplifies. Both books thus raise issues of the abuse of power, whether by a nation at war or by local officials or by townspeople.

Both books also cast doubt on the congruence between what goes on in a character's head and the realities of life. Jimmy, in *Tagged*, enjoys imagining himself as a daredevil Spitfire pilot, modelling his daydreams on old war comics, but his fantasies fail to provide the boy with courage to face the minor terrors of walking through a partly derelict building. His Spitfire pilot fantasies are also inadequate representations of the pain and terror of war, as revealed in the Vietnam veteran's story. This boy's comic-book version of heroism is unsustainable. The boy in *Memorial* declares that he will fight the council's plan, but the tree is cut down regardless. The veteran in *Tagged* claims that his mate did not die in Vietnam but will return and find him, though all the evidence of the pages depicting the failure to airlift this man points to the probability that he is dead. Like Jimmy and the unnamed boy in *Memorial*, the veteran cannot live out the promises that he imagines for himself. Jimmy is no daredevil; the boy in *Memorial* does not prevail over the council; the old veteran's mate is almost certainly dead.

Picture storybooks and graphic novels

Though the themes of *Memorial* and *Tagged* are similar, the treatment of these themes is quite different in each book. Much of this difference is related to overall differences between their genres. A striking difference between the genres of picture storybook and graphic novel concerns their audiences. Picture story books are designed, traditionally, for a dual audience of the child, too young to read the verbal text, and the older reader, most likely a parent or teacher, who speaks the words while the child looks at the pictures. Author-illustrators like Shaun Tan and Raymond Briggs have expanded the audience for some of their picture story books to older children and adults reading to themselves (Briggs 1982; Keeping 1989) but, in general, picture story books remain the province of the young child and the adult co-reader. The graphic novel, in contrast, is written for the independent older child or young adult reader. In its affiliation with comic books, this genre still carries some overtones of adult disapproval (at least in the Western world). *Tagged* explicitly acknowledges its debt to the comic book tradition in its old-fashioned black and white illustrations of the Spitfire hero that Jimmy imagines himself to be, and in the old war comics depicted on the book's first page.

The difference between audiences for picture storybooks and graphic novels entails a different reading tempo for each. The graphic novel is likely to be read much more quickly, at the pace of the individual reader. The picture storybook is likely to be read slowly, with pauses for the adult to explain the

words or point out features of the illustrations or check that the child is paying attention or even invent a game of spotting specific visual details. Picture storybooks tend to be less driven by plot than graphic novels, less dependent on maintaining a high level of excitement and suspense. Thus very little happens in the course of *Memorial's* pages, and very little specific detail is given as to the wars that these veterans remember. In contrast, *Tagged* is full of things happening: the discovery of a rat, Jimmy's dog running away, the Vietnam veteran's story of how his friend was shot down.

Tagged uses many of the graphic novel's usual conventions derived from cartoon and comic, like the jagged outline signifying an explosion, and conventions derived from film production, like the sequence of small framed pictures (equivalent to film shots) representing stages in an action. These might seem to slow the book's pace but in practice they can be taken in at a glance, speeding the action up. The emphasis in *Tagged* is on rapid action. Picture story books sometimes adopt the same conventions, as when a sequence of small framed pictures on *Memorial's* title page shows a tree beginning to grow; but this sequence shows stages of growth separated by weeks or months rather than the speeded up human action characteristic of the graphic novel. This tree's germination carries no immediate threat, suspense or promise of violent action.

While the multiple rapid sequences of small-framed pictures characterizes *Tagged* as a graphic novel, the full-page wordless illustration characterizes *Memorial* as a picture storybook. *Memorial* has seven such pages, *Tagged* only one – and this final page of *Tagged*, showing the dead soldier's tags, is not exactly wordless, for it also depicts the partially obscured words on two signs, 'emergency stop' and 'forward'.

The difference in reading tempo means that the picture storybook genre is more hospitable to themes of reflection and gentle reminiscence than the graphic novel genre. In *Tagged*, Jimmy wakes, takes his dog for a walk, runs, gets knocked over by his dog, listens to a story of violence and then leaves. In *Memorial*, the boy asks questions, listens, expresses indignation and finally reflects. *Memorial's* first episode concerns an elderly man tearfully remembering his war past. 'We got chopped to bits at Ypres,' he says, alluding to a notorious slaughter-ground of the First World War; but the allusion is not developed in either words or illustrations. The picture storybook eschews its opportunities for sensational images here. Instead, the great-grandfather's words are illustrated with small sepia pictures like photographs that show soldiers away from the battlefield, smartly dressed, probably posing for a family memento.

The Vietnam veteran in *Tagged* is shown seated throughout Jimmy's visit. This seated position might be regarded as an indication of peaceful inner reflection on his distressing story, and there is said to be 'a dreamy sort of

peace in his eyes', but there is also a hint of unpredictability and potential violence about him. Three damaged dolls hang by the neck, shoulder and wrist from his rail and at one point (perhaps indicating that he is hallucinating) the largest doll speaks with his wife's voice (Figure 1). Has his family, then, left him not only because of his constant retellings of his war story but because he was also physically violent towards them? The uncanny dolls and several pictures of the Vietnam War infuse his long speech with suspense and violence. Like most other graphic novels, *Tagged* does not allow a sequence of unheightened reminiscences.

There is no room in this novel for reflection. The veteran's outpourings amount to a compulsive retelling of his past traumatic experience rather than reminiscences set in the mellowing context of a life lived in peace since those events. Each of the adult men of *Memorial* has a wife and family, and memories of the tree that extend beyond its associations with war. The veteran's words in *Tagged*, in contrast, serve to annihilate the distance of years between past and present, just as his choice of a place to live, down dark passageways in a derelict building, attempts to recreate his life underground in Vietnamese tunnels during the war. Rather than becoming tearful over his past, he is incapable of moving psychologically beyond the guilt of leaving his mate behind. There seems to be very little opportunity, either, for the boy to reflect in this story. On his own, he fills his imagination with Spitfire pilot war heroics, and with the veteran, his attention seems taken up with listening, so that his final promise to return (if taken as a gesture of friendship) is unconvincing because given no motivation. Little evidence is provided in *Tagged* for any change of heart for this child from the fearful explorer of ruins at the start to a compassionate friend for the lonely veteran at the end.

A grimmer reading of this final scene between boy and sleeping man can also be argued. Rather than promising to return out of kindness and concern, the boy may be drawn back by the prospect of hearing the story again, as predictable a pleasure as that given by his war comics. This reading, too, allows for no reflection on the boy's part. In contrast, the boy's patience and understanding are attested to in *Memorial* by the series of conversations he holds with his great-grandfather, grandfather and father, full of pauses which give time for reflection.

Intertextuality

Whether as compassionate listener or war story addict, Jimmy's behaviour towards the veteran in *Tagged* is in conflict with the book's front cover illustration. Here the derelict brickworks is shown in ominous reds and oranges in the lower part of the illustration. Through a darker opening can be seen

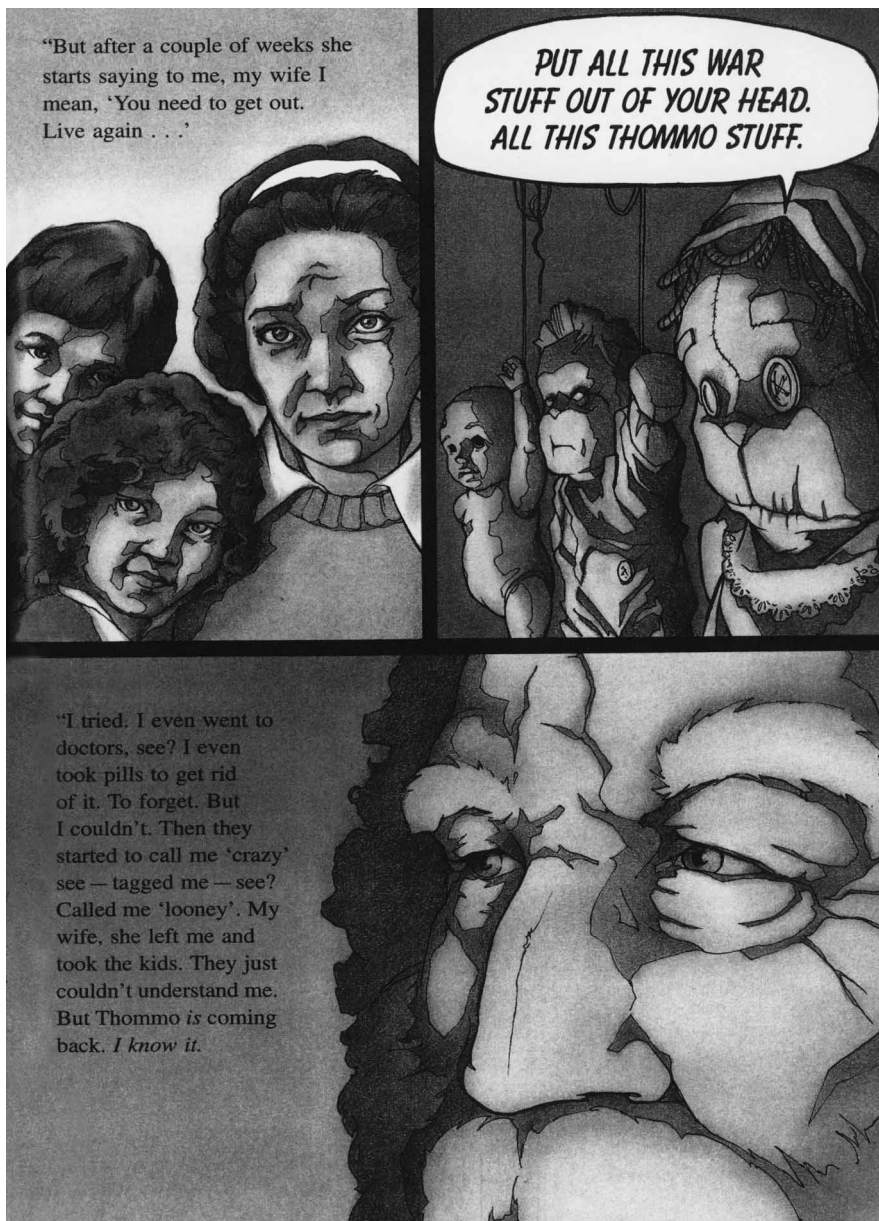


Figure 1 From Gary Crew and Steven Woolman's *Tagged*. Copyright Era Publications, 1997. Used with permission.

someone running or striding to the right, looking back over his shoulder to a hand extended towards him. It is unclear whether the hand is clutching or pointing, and the rest of the body to which the hand presumably belongs is hidden behind the building wall. The wide brown sleeve from which this hand extends suggests a monk's habit, with connotations of Gothic horror, and in a pile of rubbish below, a plank leans at such an angle as to suggest a wizard's staff, with black magic connotations. Once the book has been begun, the moving figure in the front cover illustration is identifiable as Jimmy, but no scene in the book corresponds to this rapid walk or run away from the extended hand that must belong to someone standing up. The veteran is seated throughout Jimmy's visit and does not physically menace the boy, nor does Jimmy run from him.

The book's title page provides a different set of clues as to what is to come. The book *Tagged* is itself depicted here along with the collected works of Coleridge and a book whose title contains the word 'Arthur'. These could be Jimmy's books, for the muddle of items on the floor beside them includes an aeroplane model and war pilot comic books. The inclusion of the Coleridge book suggests an allusion to 'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner', Coleridge's ballad about an ex-sailor who compulsively repeats his story of death and woe to every available listener, willing or not. *Tagged's* veteran is aged like Coleridge's Mariner and has a similar compulsion to repeat, but there is nothing in his story to indicate a release from pain such as the Ancient Mariner is given by divine grace. The distress of remembered trauma continues to hang about this war veteran's neck.

Also lying on the floor with the book-within-a-book *Tagged* is the *Arthur* book, which presumably contains stories of King Arthur and his knights. The conjunction of all three books with the old war comics suggests that their reader enjoys stories of lone adventurers whether they be mediaeval knights on quests or accursed mariners or pilots winning through against impossible odds. Perhaps *Tagged* is also to be understood as one of Jimmy's books, to be revisited as his war comics are revisited in his imagination. Jimmy's promise to return to the Vietnam veteran at the end of *Tagged* could thus be construed as Jimmy's promise as a reader that he will revisit the veteran's story as a war story with similar status to his comics. The compulsively retold story that at one level of interpretation is a symptom of post traumatic stress disorder in the Vietnam veteran, is for the boy, on this level of interpretation, just light entertainment.

Another reading of this title page illustration can also be argued. By conjoining publications referring to King Arthur, the Ancient Mariner and the Second World War, Woolman and Crew may be making an ironic point about these stories' quests. King Arthur's knights are supported by the laws of chivalry and have a place at the court in Camelot; their last communal quest

is for a sacred object, the Holy Grail. Coleridge's Mariner is a solitary wanderer, but he has found a meaning to his torment and knows the value of both prayer and love. The war comic heroes are individual daredevils supported by their air force, but in the twentieth century their adventures have no spiritual dimension. *Tagged* depicts a solitary ex-soldier with neither spiritual nor social support. No divine power intervenes to save him, nor does he pursue an attainable quest.

The book-within-a-book device also calls into question the reading experience of actual readers of *Tagged*. Do readers turn to graphic novels as Jimmy does to his war comics, as addicts? How far is readers' choice of *Tagged* to read representative of their habitual reading matter, such that they are as much compelled to read it as the Mariner or *Tagged's* veteran is compelled to retell his story? The self-deception practised by both the veteran and Jimmy in *Tagged*, the one promising himself that his missing mate will find him, the other imagining himself as a fearless fighter pilot, can be understood as a sardonic reflection on the readership of *Tagged* itself.

The family support evident in each generation of *Memorial's* characters reflects the reading experience of many children who look at the illustrations to picture storybooks while the words are read to them by a parent. There is a vast difference between the isolated veteran's plight in *Tagged* and the family support available to each of the adults in *Memorial*. In the picture storybook, no war veteran is alone, abandoned by wife and children; here society also cares about the commemoration of war, as hinted at in the indications that the great-grandfather is attending an Anzac Day remembrance ceremony, wearing his medals and ribbons. Authority, in the form of the town council, may let down those people who value memorials or the life of a tree, but it neither mocks at nor discards those who remember war. *Tagged's* veteran, in contrast, pours out his story despite social and familial sanctions. The doctors, his family and townspeople have all treated him as a mentally ill man. He would perhaps still have a family life far from the rats in the brick-works if only he could stop compulsively remembering.

Also linked with the experience of reading each book is the amount of interpretation and explanation given within each. Crew and Tan allude to the Vietnam War and Ypres without explaining either reference in detail. A child reader may be particularly puzzled as to why the father in *Memorial* is unwilling to share his memories of Vietnam with his son. In the process of reading a picture storybook, an adult reader is usually available to explain such allusions to the young child. There are many details in *Memorial's* illustrations which a child may need adult guidance to appreciate more fully, like the tree rings that indicate the age of the tree when cut down.

In the graphic novel, which is likely to be read by a solo independent reader, much is explained. The veteran's story is told at length and illustrated

not only with pictures of the two soldiers below the helicopter and the shooting down of one of them, but also with more general illustrations of the war in Vietnam, framed in rudimentary television sets 'reminding the reader that much of the Vietnam war was seen "at home" on television'. (Anstey and Bull 2000: 167). Snake imagery recurs in *Tagged*, from the snake-like path that Jimmy follows through the building to the huge snake into which the rescuing helicopter's ropes are transformed. The Vietnam veteran explains to Jimmy that in the Vietcong tunnels, he and his mate were wary of white snakes that could kill a man within three steps of being bitten. This account makes it clear to the reader that the snake imagery is associated with the Vietnamese enemy and does not refer to the sacred Rainbow Serpent of Australian aboriginal myth, despite the Australian setting of the book. The snake-path represents the veteran's attempt to replicate the Vietcong tunnels in his current living place, hoping that his mate will be led by the familiar snake image to find him again. One of the significances of the book's title, *Tagged*, is fully explained to Jimmy by the veteran when he talks of his missing mate's need for his identity to be returned to him. Child readers of *Memorial* are given no such help in interpreting the story, even though they are likely to be younger and less experienced readers than those of *Tagged*. Thus in *Memorial*, the symbolism of the falling leaves is nowhere explicated.

Knowledge is represented as readily shared in *Tagged*, by way of the veteran's speech, war comics, television programmes and film, but the characters' knowledge is not necessarily either helpful or accurate. The veteran's problem is that he remembers too vividly, too immediately, too compulsively: he knows but cannot process his knowledge through accepting his mate's probable death and appropriately grieving. Some of the knowledge of war represented in the form of the boy's fantasies is shown up, in the context of the veteran's story, as glamorized, simplified, stereotyped and therefore false. The comic books, as their images are transmitted through the depiction of Jimmy's fantasies, offer a fraudulent set of images of war experience that leave out any sense of suffering beyond the heroic. His fantasies lack moral and psychological depth. Jimmy knows these comic book images very well, replaying them in his imagination with himself as hero, but they are not an accurate representation of his timid personality either. The missing soldier's identification tags contain knowable factual information as to his name, army number and nationality, but this form of identification does not amount to the missing man's identity as the veteran claims. His certainty that his friend will come back and receive his identity in the form of the tags is a deluded belief. Thus, despite all its explanations, *Tagged* abounds with highly questionable kinds of knowledge and certainty. In *Memorial*, certainty is problematic, whether it be the certainty of those planting the commemorative tree

that it would long serve as a memorial or the certainty of the boy assuring his father that he would fight against the council's decision to cut the tree and force them to understand why it is wrong. There is nothing questionable, however, about the knowledge of twentieth century wars held by *Memorial's* veterans. Their knowledge may be withheld through absent-mindedness, emotion or refusal to speak, but there is no sense in the picture storybook that what these men say about their past is distorted or fraudulent. In *Tagged*, the more a fact is insisted upon, the less believable it comes to be. It is paradoxical that the abundant explanation of *Tagged* helps undermine the believability of its characters' interpretations of their lives, while the relative reticence of *Memorial* contributes to the believability of its reminiscences.

A humorous sequence of illustrations in *Tagged* shows Jimmy going through the brickworks. Depicted here in colour, cautiously stretching out one hand while ready to ward off danger with the other, he morphs into the black and white fighter pilot who advances confidently; then the black and white image morphs back into full colour as timid Jimmy. This sequence illustrates the summoning and fading of Jimmy's courage, but the comic book style monochrome illustrations of Jimmy as hero show the truth of the situation: the war hero as whom he likes to imagine himself is inauthentic and unreal. A similar device is used in *Memorial* to differentiate the illustrations of the memorial tree, depicted in the book's most saturated hues and given an intricate pattern of light and shade for three-dimensional effect, from the illustrations of the statue and scenes and characters from the past. These images of the past are rendered more remote by either being framed and tinted sepia like old photographs or being set in window frames as though observed from a distance through glass. The great-grandfather's head and torso, in the story's present, are depicted in a finely outlined, lightly tinted sketch that is unfinished, outlines of his jacket showing through his hand, his left side merging into the flat background to the verbal text (Figure 2). The old man is thus represented as far less palpably real than the memorial tree. In visual terms, the tree is history thoroughly incarnated, as against the sketchily rendered photographs of the dead or the statue which is always indistinct. In cutting down the tree, the council leaves the world of the book less real.

Gaps

Crew has urged his critics to pay attention to the gaps in his books (McKenna and Neilsen 1992: 17). A conceptual gap opens in the last pages of *Memorial* where the great-grandfather says (and the boy asserts this to be true) that memories are 'ever-living, like the tree'. The tree has been cut down and is clearly not 'ever-living'. Images of fallen leaves hint at the great-grandfather's



Figure 2 From Gary Crew and Shaun Tan's *Memorial*. Copyright Shaun Tan, 1999. Used with permission.

coming death as images of fallen leaves earlier in the book partly cover the photographs of his World War 1 mates, gently symbolizing their deaths. Men die, the tree dies, memory can be terminated: such is the opposing truth

suggested by the illustrations. History can be obliterated as easily as by chopping down a tree – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, since the enemy’s chopping of men to pieces at Ypres is echoed by the council workmen’s chopping down of the tree, the attempt to obliterate history dooms men to repeat it (albeit on a smaller scale, in this case).

Gaps also exist in *Tagged*. A sequence of pictures shows Jimmy going through the building while the accompanying verbal text speaks of his increasing dread; yet nothing bad happens to him and the sequence ends anticlimactically. There is another gap between the sequence of illustrations of the veteran’s mate being shot and falling into a blood-red pit and the veteran’s words asserting that he is still alive and will return. One picture in this sequence shows the veteran as he is in the story’s present, reaching forward as if to try to rescue his falling friend. Both in the present and past, he fails to bridge the gap between his clutching hand and his mate’s hand. He cannot bridge the psychological gap between denial and grieving or the gap between the mentally ill and the rest of society. He tries to annihilate the gap between his wartime past and his present by choosing to live in the brickworks, replicating as best he can his living conditions in Vietnam. Brick corridors stand for the tunnels, the brickworks roof is broken as if by a bomb explosion, and a dockside rat replaces the other ‘tunnel rats’, the soldiers whose job it was to clear the tunnels of enemies.

The brickworks that houses *Tagged*’s veteran is derelict and fenced off, but the fence is torn, allowing Jimmy and his dog in, and a prominent path leads through its labyrinth. These features of the building are emblematic of the veteran himself, compulsively following only one path of behaviour. He has been tagged as mentally ill and rejected as the building has been fenced off and left to decay. There is still a way to reach him, a gap in the fence, but only for someone who is also looking for a lost companion. In a similar way, the memorial tree in *Memorial* is emblematic of that book’s veterans and their wives, vulnerable to death but, while alive, part of a community and functioning in many different ways.

The statue in *Memorial* is that of the Unknown Soldier, one man representing all the country’s unidentifiable war dead. Such a communal memorial, like the tree, is at risk from the current council’s contempt for memorials and what they represent. *Tagged*’s veteran could be considered another Unknown Soldier, rejected and unhonoured, his memorial a disused brickworks. The memorial tree is invested with collective memories, the veteran obsessed with individual memories of a past history. Despite the killing of the tree and the veteran’s isolation, the memories that they carry can still be heard; but neither book proposes a remedy for a town council that disdains history or a man who cannot free his mind from it.

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